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Pornography and Documentary Narrating the Alibi

From its beginnings, photography braided documentary form and sexual content, using pin-up and pornographic images of female performers and prostitutes. The introduction of moving images continued this paired development and the interwoven nature of the erotic and the factual. We know that this pairing goes back to the origins of cinema, when Maxim Gorky notes that he first saw the Cinematograph in a brothel, or when Edison's twenty-second film, *The Kiss* (1896), was denounced as obscene. The pattern continues. Today in the United States on the most successful subscription cable channel, Home Box Office (HBO), the most productive programming area is HBO documentary (gaining the greatest viewership for the lowest production costs). The most successful HBO documentary series is *Real Sex*, a one-hour program typically featuring four to six short documentary segments covering such topics as an adult masturbation club or a manufacturer of extremely realistic sex toys or mannequins. Also in the United States, the music video channels MTV and VH-1 regularly produce sex-themed documentaries, including a survey of porn stars who appear in rock videos and a depiction of how young women can audition for hard-core pornography videos in Los Angeles. The broadcast networks have followed suit and presented occasional "investigative" documentaries on aspects of the sex industry. In each



FIGURE 1 Highly rated HBO series like *Real Sex* and *Cathouse* (above) continue a documentary tradition as old as Edison's notorious film of 1896, *The Kiss*—the cinematic documentation of sexual practice.

of these, the content is sex, employing a transgressive voyeurism showing us what is normally censored, but at the same time marking the transgression with digital blurs of nipples and butt cracks. The defense of this forbidden content is the documentary form itself: documentary's "gravity," the "discourse of sobriety," provides the excuse that allows the naughty content to appear in the public sphere with little controversy.

To say this is to restate commonplace observations. First, even when presented as dramatic fictional narrative or as freewheeling fantasy, pornography has a fundamental core of documentation: this is it, this is sex, this is what it looks like. Second, one legal defense of pornography has been precisely its educational possibility; thus pornographers have often tried to evade censorship by explicitly presenting sexual images as factual documentation (or sometimes as art). My interest here is to move beyond these well-marked points and extend recent work. What happens when documentaries move beyond their usual sober realism directed at significant social matters to more bizarre, eccentric, and "low" subject matter? Further, in such sleazy voyeurism, what is the role of the narrator, almost always present in voice, if not in onscreen person? What are the politics of the alibi?

I take it as axiomatic that sleaze, as understood by both makers and audiences, depends on an understanding of existing conventions and also on a sense of those conventions being worn out. The “voice” of sleaze in documentary is always cynical.¹ Therefore, looking at one key element in most sleazy documentaries—the narrator—should help us better understand these works and, not so incidentally, more fully comprehend narration in mainstream documentaries as well. The narrator, whether appearing only in off-screen voice or in person on-screen, is a presence between the screen sound and image and the audience. Understanding the margins, the limit cases, always clarifies the center, the norm, and “normal,” and underlines the social construction of both. To advance this analysis, I will examine several particular cases and arrange their discussion chronologically. However, my main interest is in constructing a critical typology of sleazy narrator styles rather than a true history of development and change. This survey (with several detours) should allow a conclusion about the aesthetic politics of sleazy documentary.

An Aside on Sleaze

What do I mean by *sleazy*? I’ll offer a working definition here and return to the question of definition in conclusion. *Sleazy* in current usage refers to something disgusting, filthy, nasty; that is, it has the connotation of being “low” culturally and morally. In current British usage the word is often used in discussions of politics to refer to politicians compromised by payoffs, graft, or mercenary actions overriding law, principle, or the common good. And the term is often present in making distinctions about sexual matters: *sleazy* means sexually promiscuous, sexually active without discrimination.

In an earlier essay, I distinguished a tendency in popular commercial art that I called self-aware kitsch.² These texts are filled with parodic clichés and depend on exaggerating and underlining, thus setting up a camp response, as in the heightened bedroom-and-boardroom television series *Dynasty*. Following Susan Sontag’s discussion of camp and significant gay/queer critical elaborations of the concept, high camp can be seen as a strategy for ironic and comic reading of the highly aestheticized (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, the typical staging of Verdi operas, Cole Porter lyrics, etc.).³ Low camp, or trash, can be a strategy for celebrating the debased: in the counterculture avant-garde (early

John Waters films, Jack Smith, George Kuchar) and in the commercial cinema (*Dumb and Dumber* [1994], *American Pie* [1999]).

Sleaze, then, is used pejoratively, judgmentally. It depends on making cultural distinctions (understanding distinction as a class and cultural term, as in Pierre Bourdieu’s definition).⁴ Essentially ironic, it depends on looking down on something. In the case of the work considered here, there is also a strong sense that the “sleazy” work is crass, that it is not sincere but is adopting whatever ethical and moral stance it has simply to exploit its subject. A classic example can be found in the scenes of slave trading in *Mondo Freud* (1966) and *Mondo Bizarro* (1966). These fake documentaries purport to show the auctioning of (mostly) women in Mexico and Lebanon. The scenes are patently staged (“Lebanon” is a well-known Los Angeles-area location, Bronson Canyon). The “slaves” are disrobed, to display female breasts, but genitals are obscured with scratched-on censor bars, thus implying that the female pubic area (viewed in a distant telephoto image) is more shocking than trading in humans. If we assumed the documentation was genuine, the filmmakers’ moral/ethical stance is obviously questionable in that they simply record and do not intervene in the moment of the sale, nor do they provide their cinematography as evidence to the police or other authorities, nor do they publicize what is going on to the press or social and political organizations. *Mondo Bizarro* actually goes so far as to have an extended sequence showing the camera crew’s heroic efforts to move their heavy equipment to a hilltop, using a block and tackle and sledge, for secret telephoto filming of slave trading. Clearly the aim of the slavery sections is not justice or human sympathy for (fictional) victims, but simply to show something sensational, titillating (and tits), combining this with a pompous voice-over narration that makes a feeble attempt to justify it as information.⁵ With sleaze, the joke, the demeaning part, is on the audience.

1960s exploitation

Mondo Freud and *Mondo Bizarro* follow after *Mondo Cane*, an internationally successful sensationalist documentary phenomenon from 1962.⁶ Cheaply made rip-offs, they belong economically and industrially to the exploitation film market. The exploitation film has roots in the fairground show, the circus sideshow, and the traveling carnival. The carnival pitchman’s basic plan is this: (1) gather

a crowd; (2) promise them something sensational; (3) get their money; and (4) fool them and get away. At its worst-intentioned, in the classic con job, the “mark” is left at the end so confused, embarrassed, humiliated, or compromised that he does not go to the police or authorities to complain (and this is relatively easy when the content is sexual). But there is also a much milder version of exploitation, closer to P. T. Barnum’s celebrated “humbug” effect. Barnum observed and exploited the fact that if the deception was done in a fairly jovial, over-the-top manner, marks would gladly pay to observe the fraudulent and leave amused rather than outraged.⁷

Building on this exploitation tradition, the Mondo films of the 1960s simply adapted this con to new technologies, audiences, and rationales.⁸ In *Mondo Freudo*, for example, the filmmakers purportedly explore a world of nude performance, topless-dancing night clubs, and other sexual scenes, using the pretense of a journalistic investigation into unusual social behaviors to present mostly fake scenarios (created and performed only for this film). During this period, the only legitimate legal defense against obscenity in the United States was to claim artistic, social, scientific, or educational value in exhibiting nudity (the juridical constraint on media circulation). It would take tortured logic to claim scientific or educational value for this material, and it would be difficult to claim it was art (at least as art was understood by most people and the judicial system at the time). Therefore it was safest to claim value in social investigation: the social sciences and investigative journalism come to the rescue of sexual looking. (We might note that in 1960s America, after the basic college introductory course, the favorite sociology course for undergraduates on many campuses was Sociology of Deviance, often known by campus slang as “Nuts and Sluts.”)⁹

Following the model of *Mondo Cane*, *Mondo Freudo* offers an anthology of “unusual” activities and behaviors, mostly centered around some form or another of sexual display, which in the mid-1960s world of U.S. theatrical cinema meant bare breasts. In an early sequence, *Mondo Freudo* purports to show “night vision” images of heterosexual couples caressing on a beach in Los Angeles. Ordinary young people are thus presented as ethnographic Others.¹⁰ The film then shows teenagers gathering on Hollywood Boulevard and driving around in vehicles (using poorly executed, very cheap location footage shot

without sound) followed by footage of various nightclubs, with local variations and restrictions on nudity and dancing. But from the very beginning, an off-screen narrator marks the visuals with an ironic tone:

Long Shot: ocean beach from palisades above.

Male Voice-Over:

It is Saturday afternoon in Southern California. A lazy summer afternoon, and on this day some 25,000 people will come onto this beach for fun and relaxation. Our cameraman has established a vantage point on a hill high above the beach.

Medium Shot (man removes lens from case):

This is a 1000-millimeter telescopic lens with a telebar attachment developed by Burns and Sawyer Cine Equipment Rental of Hollywood. The unit is equal to a 1,700-millimeter lens. The lens is being mounted on an Arriflex model 11B 35-millimeter motion picture camera. This camera and lens will provide you with the majority of what you are about to see in the film. They will give you a long close-up look at our society. This lens and this camera will be your eyes to peer into Mondo Freudo—a Freudian world of sex and sex symbols and the strange and unusual laws that govern them. (Surfer sound music up.)

Credits begin, alternated with daylight telephoto shots of people on the beach.

In addition to a montage of telephoto shots of ordinary people on the beach, medium shots show the removal of the long lens, which is then mounted on the camera. The voice-over’s recitation of details such as the length of the lens and the name of the equipment rental company (still in business today) grounds the images with selective fact, giving the film an aura of investigative truth (and most likely also a rental discount for promoting the equipment house).

While the film claims to show Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Hamburg, and Kyoto (a kind of comparative ethnography of strip clubs), the claims become suspect when you notice that “London” has the same tablecloth patterns as Los Angeles, and that “Hamburg” is identified only by common travel posters on the wall of an inexpensive set. A topless dancer in “Los Angeles” appears to also be (magically) in the audience in “London.” Similarly, the film

claims that it is showing us a public wall where London prostitutes freely advertise, but the location is the mythological space of "Piccadilly Square."¹¹

The title sequence in *Mondo Bizarro*, meanwhile, purports to show a hidden camera view inside a lingerie store; the voice-over narrator tells us it's "the east side of Chicago" (another mythical place, since the east side of Chicago is Lake Michigan).¹² The narrator explains the camera is behind a "two-way mirror" (a disconcertingly weird detail—one would expect a one-way mirror) and that the filmmakers were forced to censor the models' faces. This censorship is accomplished visually by scratches on the film to obliterate the eyes).¹³ Here a parade of women remove their clothes and try on different bras to peculiar changes of music, producing a weird musical collage. After this introductory credit sequence with fictitious crew names and acknowledgments to imaginary organizations (apparently to make the production seem more impressive), there follows a shot of a slowly turning and badly rendered handmade globe. A male voice-over intones a nonsensical epistemological statement: "To the worm in the cheese, the cheese is the universe. To the maggot in the cadaver, the cadaver is infinity. And to you, what is your world? How do you know what is beyond the Beyond? Most of us don't even know what is behind the Beyond."

In both films, the unseen Mondo narrator recites his "facts" to us in an uneven rhetorical stance. At times the voice-over seems to give unnecessarily specific factual details (the 1000-mm lens with the telebar attachment) and at other times it simply lies about what is on screen. Thus in *Mondo Freud*, after the daylight shots of the beach, a camera assistant is shown rigging a pitifully small scoop reflector light while the narrator describes it as an infrared "night vision" apparatus that will allow the surreptitious night filming. At other times, the narrator presents as fact statements that, upon reflection, seem incredible. In *Mondo Bizarro*, for example, over some standard tourist shots of urban areas in the Bahamas, the narrator explains that the former African slaves still practice voodoo on the island and promises that the telephoto lens will reveal a secret nighttime ceremony. The xenophobic narration contrasts the presently "civilized" everyday appearance of Bahamians with their wild and primitive ancestors, claiming that in the past celebrants sacrificed a "white baby" in such ceremonies (but today substitute a white chicken). Yet simple reason would assume that in a slave culture with a small group of white settlers and a large black

population, the whites could hardly produce enough babies for the frequent ceremonies. Moreover, even if this incredible event did happen, even just once, the immense power differential between colonialists and slaves would produce swift and severe punishment, making it impossible for any voodoo cultists to maintain the practice. In the end, what we actually see is a distant group dancing around a fire at night, and possibly the beheading of a fowl and the sacrifice of a large snake (though it could easily be a fake—perhaps a length of rope). The real content, however, is a racist fantasy of an African threat concocted from tourist footage, staged dancing, and shaping powers of the offscreen narrator.

Historical Side Trip:

God Interpellates the Audience

The classic off-screen narrator is often called the Voice of God, since the audience hears his pronouncements without seeing the embodied speaker. Usually this is a male voice with deep tones, sure phrasing, and an "educated" accent, which in the United States often means a hint of British intonation or a voice that seems trained for stage delivery. Through wartime and postwar educational materials, audiences in the military, industry, and schools became extremely habituated to such narration, or even a single omnipresent voice talent. In Canada, for example, actor Lorne Greene (later best known as the family patriarch in the popular television western series, *Bonanza*) was the standard stentorian offscreen voice for a generation of National Film Board documentaries.

Having grown up with this convention, it is easy to see why a younger generation of documentary filmmakers, especially in the 1960s, were eager to move away from this kind of authoritative (even authoritarian) voice. They chose to work instead in classic Direct Cinema style, employing a narrational style that seemed to eschew such external authority. This often involved placing the narrator on screen, either on location as an on-the-spot investigator or as a relay for eyewitness accounts. In this respect, the narrator becomes a more embodied character, a teller of the tale who, though perhaps unreliable, allowed the audience to better gauge his veracity.

Both forms of narration, however, demonstrate cinematic strategies for adapting the older form and forum of the public lecture. In the United States in particular, the public lecture blossomed in the nineteenth century with the

Chautauqua and other forms of informational address. In a society that stressed public education, literacy, and democratic citizenship (for white men), the public lecture, like political oratory and religious preaching, served an epistophilic function. The serious voice-over narrator in documentary media began with the nineteenth-century slide-lecture show and continued with the live voice-over narration of film travelogues before the advent of the sync-sound film. Typically, the presenter, posed as an educated gentleman, narrated trips to “civilized” places and adventures in exotic locales. Visiting the Holy Land was a favorite lecture topic in Middle America, and like the rhetoric of *National Geographic*, the presentations usually mixed a quasi-intellectual edification with banal imperial tourism. In a lecture with a slide show or silent film, the voice appeared embodied in the initial setup but then became simply a presence in the dark that explained the visuals. The same model developed as well in broadcast journalism that followed print’s “eyewitness” reportage model.¹⁴ The defining moment took place in the mid-1930s with the transformation of the *March of Time* documentary to a voice-over format, abandoning its origins as a silent film short (with intertitles) that followed the editorial lead and style of *Time* magazine. The announcer, Westbrook Van Voorhis, quickly became recognizable delivering “Time-speak” voice-overs for the monthly series. A *New Republic* critic made the analogy to a god explicit: “Just such a voice . . . would have been hired to speak the lines of one of Euripides’ suave male gods—those gods who appeared so opportunely at the end of a tragedy when everything was going up in flames and agnosticism, and explained matters away. Nobody has ever been quite sure what those gods believed in or whether they even believed in themselves; and this gives them a real affinity with the voice that does the talking for the March of Time.”¹⁵ Within the business, Van Voorhis was dubbed “the voice of fate,” and by the late 1930s, comedians often imitated his distinctive style. At the same time, U.S. radio drama flourished, often using the announcer as a prime character, voice, and organizing presence in the narration, as in much of Orson Welles’s radio work of the period.

By the time the Mondo films adopted this convention in the early 1960s, the voice of God was a well-established and familiar device. The authoritarian voice, delivered in the same implacable tone across a diversity of topics, has over the years led to a perhaps inevitably ironic, even cynical audience response. Indeed,

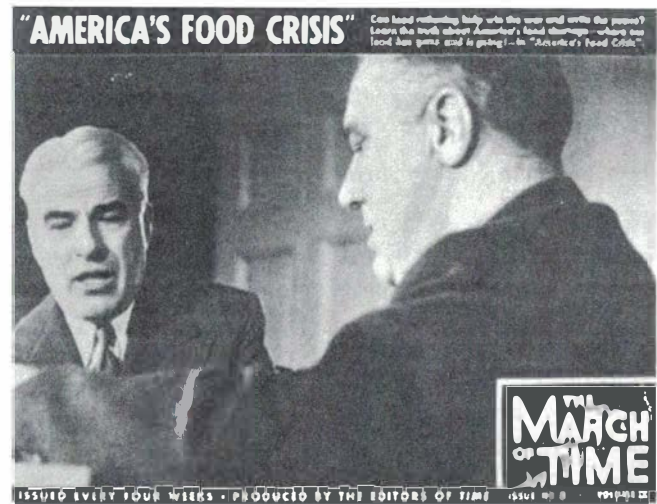


FIGURE 2 Lobby card for *Time* magazine’s famous *March of Time* series, which established Westbrook Van Voorhis as the documentary form’s “voice of fate.”

even in the 1940s, the mock *March of Time* newsreel at the start of *Citizen Kane* (1941) was as much a parody of these conventions as mere exposition, a satiric aspect usually lost on today’s audience.¹⁶ This irony becomes especially salient when the subject turns from the recitation of dry facts to advising on matters of policy and personal behavior. The voice of God in classroom “scare films,” for example, is often a target of derision, laughter, and outright hostility as it moralistically lectures teens about reckless driving, drug use, alcohol abuse, or premarital sex.

In the classic voice-of-God vehicle, then, a disembodied voice provides an authoritative interpretation of the images on screen. The Mondo films, on the other hand, frequently revel in contradicting the narrator’s discursive sobriety. For example, in a *Mondo Bizarro* segment on Frederick’s of Hollywood (the mail-order store of “sexy” women’s underwear), we meet designer/owner Mr. Frederick, who demonstrates such items as cutaway-rear girdles that produce round rather than flat buttocks (illustrated with a live model). Many other types of underclothing are exhibited as well, including brassieres incorporating novelties such as cutout tips, cutaway tops, and inflatable cups (shown repeat-

edly with the wearer blowing into a plastic tube to enlarge the appearance). The sequence ends as the narrator proclaims “an industrial symphony”: there follows a poorly executed montage sequence of the shipping room efficiently sending off orders, accompanied by the strains of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Thus does *Mondo Bizarro* capture the heroic grandeur of shipping women’s underwear!

Is such a narrational intension telling us something we don’t know, indulging our epistophilia? In *Mondo Freud*’s time it was widely known that some cities had topless dancing, and it was simple to obtain a copy of *Playboy* if one wanted to see bare breasts. What exactly does this comic voice of God add to this cinematic parade of (near) nudity? Echoing Barnum’s “humbug effect,” the narrator’s voice and persona is that of a carnival pitchman with a touch of (usually jovial) condescension. I will call this narrative device “reverse disavowal”: I know this is fake, but I still want to see it. The audience knows it is seeing not some actuality but an event staged for the camera—which is the basic technique of most U.S. newsreels in celebrity and staged-publicity events.¹⁷ But the audience doesn’t necessarily resent this kind of deception, since the film and its narrator are also giving it something else: a pretext for indulging its voyeurism while also leaving room for an ironic response. In other words, the film offers the viewer a desirable spectatorial position of amusement, curiosity, and visual pleasure in a quasi-dramatized cinema. The Mondo films encourage viewers to laugh at, or along with, the “voice of sobriety”: the narrator pretends to be serious, but we know his presence merely provides an excuse for the images on screen. We are drawn into the narrator’s attitude—“let me show you this strange thing or event.” We agree and accept the contract because it gives us the gratification of naughty transgression in the mocking guise of epistophilic discovery.

This strategy of reverse disavowal is a prominent feature of many current reality television programs, especially the Mondo-like forum of *The Jerry Springer Show*. Here a series of people visibly and behaviorally marked as low-class are brought forward to behave badly in front of a jeering audience (who are themselves marked as low-class) and enact various scenarios of abjection in public. Momentary fame overcomes any sense of pain or shame. The basic gesture is flaunting one’s attitude. In addition to the show’s female guests often



FIGURE 3 Jerry Springer: inheritor of Barnum’s “humbug effect” and a central practitioner of “reverse disavowal” in current reality television.

displaying their breasts (digitally blurred), recently Springer has added—in a nod to the incredible popularity of the *Girls Gone Wild* video series—audience participants who spontaneously flash and flaunt in order to get a string of cheap beads from the show’s staff. As an onscreen narrator and provocateur, Springer ends each show with his “Final Thoughts,” sham moralizing that once again justifies the preceding charade as edifying.

We doubt these narrators—we are skeptical, we know that we may be put on, cheated, taken advantage of. But we want it. We can enjoy the rogue, especially if he is charming. We want the forbidden; at the same time we also see it as somewhat ridiculous or, in the Mondo case, juvenile, especially in its portrait of heterosexual masculinity. As we look at the displays of sexy underwear and the industrial symphony of underwear shipping in *Mondo Bizarro*, our response today can only be camp. In their own time, however, these Mondo films also allowed for a campy pleasure, since the narrator, even in his cynicism, pretends to address an impossibly naive viewer. As in the pitch of the carnival sideshow, they employ the mechanism (detailed by Freud) of being in on the smutty joke.¹⁸ The pleasure, then, is not in knowing or learning, but in sincerely appreciating the spectacle even as we ironically revel in the lowbrow tackiness

of the presentation—imagining an absent viewer who would actually fall prey to the narrator's absurd claims. Much like current fascination with supermarket tabloids that promise new and lurid exposés, Mondo viewers, both then and now, enjoy a “smarty-pants” pleasure that presumes a naive viewer who probably never existed.

Ripe Danish Blue

While *Mondo Freud* and *Mondo Bizarro* clearly, often comically, convey cynicism in their narration, *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* (1970) instead presents an apparently sincere discourse on the public sphere, only occasionally betraying a mercenary voyeurism. The commercially successful film played fairly widely in porn/adult venues in the early 1970s, just as more explicit foreign dramatic fictional films, such as *I Am Curious Yellow* (1969), were achieving wider exhibition as court decisions gradually opened the field of legal content. “Documentarians” could exploit this new environment by arguing that their films didn't show anything more than the fiction films that were being defended as cinematic art.

Sexual Freedom in Denmark uses an off-screen narrator whose voice qualities are similar to those of narrators for standard educational/informative documentary essay films of the time. This quietly stated aura of professionalism smooths the film's style and contextualizes the explicit visual content within the norms of “good taste,” a device that, in turn, potentially broadens the audience. Rather than play in the male-only porn venues of the 1960s, the film could thus cross over to the growing and crucially important couples market of the early 1970s.

The film itself presents a pastiche of various types of exploitation documentaries. We hear a lecture about representations of sex within the history of art while we see still images from art books. At times the narrator argues that most of society's ills—including war, overpopulation (and thus starvation), prostitution, venereal disease (with a close-up of a syphilitic penis) and so forth—are due to sexual repression. Various heroes are mentioned: Freud, Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson. Other passages describe with visual support the joys of nudism, the presence of sexualized images in print advertising, and the recent history of image and performance censorship (which provides an opportunity

to show topless and bottomless dancing). The film's long conclusion presents an elaborate sex-education segment that includes images of an egg entering the fallopian tubes, microscopic sperm, a zygote dividing, different forms of birth, anatomy lessons, demonstrations of Kegel exercises, and the mechanics of various methods of birth control. In addition, the section contains a fairly complete depiction of heterosexual intercourse using live models shot in negative-space studio settings with soft focus of various sexual positions. This sequence is intercut with drawings giving cutaway views of the penis in the vagina. Combining science, medicine, practical advice, and soft romantic images of young couples in coitus, the film combines older exploitation forms with the new limits of protected content in the 1970s. The narrator is key to unifying these disparate documentary forms, bringing the film in line with the era's liberal agenda in progressive sex education.

The film's title cues its most peculiar aspect. Intercut with the standard exploitation fare are recurring on-the-scene reports from Denmark addressing assorted topics related to the then-recent liberalization of Danish censorship laws. During this period, sexual liberalization advocates in the United States frequently referred to Denmark as a positive example, particularly for a reported decline in sex crimes following legalization of explicit pornography.¹⁹ Reinforcing this image of a progressive, well-adjusted, and sexually active Denmark, the onscreen male reporter interviews a range of subjects discussing an array of sexual controversies (at least in the United States). In one on-the-street interview, for example, a young woman explains in front of a crowd of passersby that she and her unmarried friends are sexually active but have no access to legal abortion and if needed have to go to “the East countries” (apparently Asia) for the procedure. The reporter mentions Poland as another possibility. On the set of a porn film, our interviewer (now hatless, revealing an odd male pattern baldness that underlines his middle-aged nerdiness) talks to the filmmaker and then several nude women during a break. He asks about how much money they make, if they have boyfriends, and the age at which they first had intercourse. One model places her arm over his shoulder, laughing, perhaps smirking, at him. A female fashion model is asked the same questions. A male research psychologist discusses the decrease in sex crimes after legalizing pornography, and a female journalist discusses laws and policies affecting youth. She shows a new

sex education book for teens that includes images of masturbation, use of a diaphragm for birth control, and an erect penis and close-up of a clitoris. She argues for future increased liberalization including education in sexual technique to increase female orgasms and produce "more happiness."

Overall, the narrator's tone in *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* strives for dispassionate professionalism. At key moments, however, disparities between this sober narration and images on the screen allow the film to drift into sleaze. As the narrator begins reading the Biblical creation story, for example, the image shows an attractive couple with contemporary hairstyles strolling nude in a forest setting. Discussion of legal changes in Denmark is accompanied by images of (presumed) Danes on a nude beach, and then later revelers frolicking naked on a small sailing ship in what amounts to the basic soft-core sunbathing footage seen in so many other exploitation titles. Later, as the narrator discusses the open sale of pornography in Copenhagen, we see exterior shots of shops before cutting to an interior where a female in a revealing mesh body stocking retails magazines to a male purchaser. Illustrations from porno magazines, nude females being body painted, and topless/bottomless performers illustrate other sequences of factual narration. While not accommodating the cynical hilarity of the Mondo films, *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* nevertheless allows viewers to adopt dual reading strategies, attending to either the sober discourse on sexual policy or the titillation of forbidden spectacle (or both).

The On-screen Expert in Decline

While *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* is staged as an informative, expository documentary, *The Postgraduate Course in Sexual Love* (1970) employs the ruse of a college classroom in which a "Professor Collins" lectures a group of students, mostly about sexual techniques. Here the lecture's exposition provides the alibi for very low budget sex scenes typical of 1970s porno films. His lecture begins with a "review" of previous lectures and a slide show of obscene art through the ages. Then the professor introduces the day's topic: sexual activity. As he discusses his topic, the camera zooms in on the faces of students who are then shown demonstrating whatever behavior the professor's voice-over describes. The film thus faintly borders on the magical, as if simply hearing an abstract medical lecture would stimulate students into fantasizing a detailed scenario.

Alternatively, we could assume that the students are recalling events (and thus indicating that the students know more than the professor, at least in terms of carnal knowledge). The sex scenes are shot without sync sound in medium long shot with occasional zooms, accompanied by postdubbed sounds of groans, moans, and West Coast acid rock. The lecture is mildly progressive in its sexual politics: students are encouraged to experiment before marriage, men are encouraged to use much foreplay with female partners, and variety is endorsed throughout. After a scene featuring two gay men, the professor's Vietnam-era politics come into play as he points out that two men having sex can be jailed while one man killing another in combat will be rewarded. After a final "orgy" with three heterosexual couples awkwardly coupling on one double bed, the bell signaling the end of class sounds. But the professor insists the students stay for a short film on venereal disease. This film-within-a-film describes the need to "Fight Love Pollution" as a pipe-smoking "doctor" advises a young couple about the dangers and prevention of syphilis and gonorrhea, including the required worst-case close-ups and illustrations of advanced stages of disease. With charts he marks a recent rise of syphilis, which he directly links to the Vietnam War.

The Postgraduate Course in Sexual Love thus relies on two narrators, Professor Collins and the anonymous pipe-smoking doctor of the VD film-within-the-film. Each serves as an authority figure, of sorts, although operating in different discursive contexts. Like much sexploitation cinema, the movie uses a standard VD-warning film to pad out its length with more "sexual" content, in the process bringing the onscreen authority of the MD in contact with his more comic embodiment in the character of the professor. With the professor, slight smirks among the students (setting up transitions from lecture material to fantasy, memory, or anticipation) seem possibly to undercut his absolute authority (as do the sex scenes, which demonstrate they have already mastered the material). With the MD, on the other hand, the couple takes every admonition as a strict rule. When the female partner complains her guy was sleeping around with some tramp and brought the disease home to her, the doctor uses his authority to stop this quarrel and focus on preventive medicine and proper treatment. Through this basic juxtaposition of medical and soft-core footage, the film inadvertently demonstrates the eroding authority of the on-screen nar-

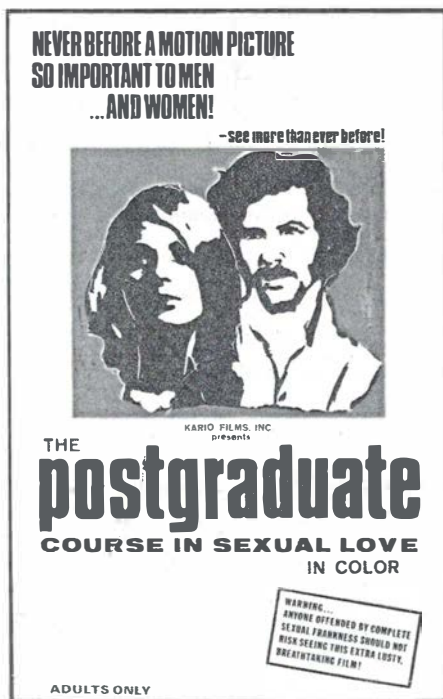


FIGURE 4 Ad copy for *The Postgraduate Course in Sexual Love* (1970), a film with two narrators operating in very different discursive contexts.

rator as an absolute arbiter of sexual knowledge. The expert becomes merely a comic pretext for motivating sexual spectacle.

Doris Wishman's infamous transsexual documentary *Let Me Die a Woman* (1977) presents a similar crisis of authority for the onscreen narrator, a conflict once again provoked by the presence of an "MD" within more mercenary exploitation fare. This expert, Dr. Wollman, invokes medical discourse and sexual science to promote a sympathetic understanding of transsexualism. But Wishman, a veteran of such exploitation subgenres as the nudist-camp film and the roughie, constantly undermines the doctor's discourse of tolerance with footage that presents transsexuals as freaks and staged episodes that exploit transsexualism for sensationalistic effect. At one point, *Let Me Die a Woman* features a heartfelt interview with Leslie, a young Puerto Rican woman who tells a story of childhood gender dysphoria, the transformation process, her current postoperative situation, and her optimistic hope for an ovary and uterus transplant. Yet, to increase its exploitative appeal, the film also inserts explicit

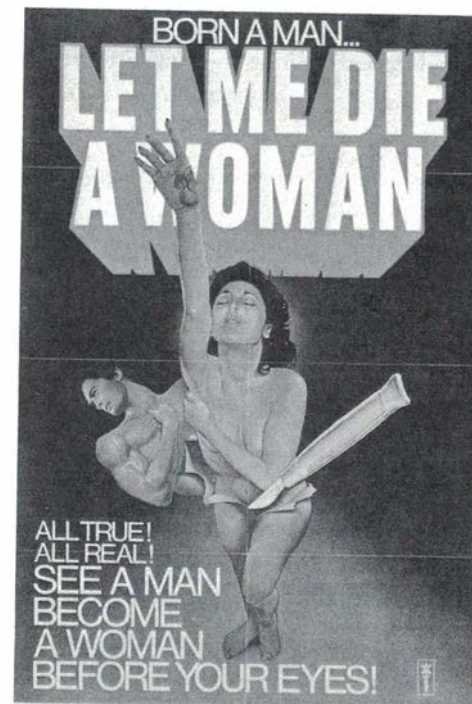


FIGURE 5 Ad art for Doris Wishman's infamous *Let Me Die a Woman* (1977). The disjointed film combines a putative call for "tolerance" of transsexuals with exploitative images of sex-change surgery and reenactments of prostitution, self-mutilation, and suicide.

surgical footage of a male-to-female operation. The original version of the film also included a bloody reenactment of a desperate male who began to cut off his own penis and testicles (a procedure finished in a hospital when the fellow collapsed).²⁰ There is also a staged sequence of a female transsexual picking up a man in Central Park. After their sexual encounter, she "shocks" the viewer by removing her underpants to reveal a small penis.

Dr. Wollman is charged with the responsibility of weaving these disparate segments together. Even with this familiar device, however, the current version of the film is particularly disjointed, and I surmise from internal evidence that reels have been placed in the wrong order, increasing the film's disorientation.²¹ Shot over a five-year period, *Let Me Die a Woman* is riddled with continuity errors as Wollman attempts to connect anatomy lectures, personal stories, dramatic reenactments, medical footage, anatomical demonstrations, and footage from Wishman's previous films. Though a "documentary," the film nevertheless exhibits many of the trademark stylistic quirks of Wishman's narrative films,

most notably her penchant for awkward postdubbed dialogue and frequent cutaways to seemingly meaningless objects in the mise-en-scène. This clumsy aspect of the film enhances its aura of sleaziness, especially in the inelegant juxtaposition of the MD's "authoritative" call for tolerance and understanding (supported by the affecting testimony of actual transsexuals) with footage of cheap porn, anatomical close-ups, penile surgery, and sensationalistic reenactments of prostitution, self-mutilation, and suicide. The film is striking for its ironic contrast of the on-screen expert's good intentions and the exploitation tactics of shock, cheap sensationalism, freakishness, and prurient voyeurism.

The Sleazy Narrator

As these examples of 1960s documentary exploitation demonstrate, the putative authority and discernable earnestness of a narrator (on- or off-screen) is often unable to withstand the crisis presented by the trashy, suspect, and incongruous images of exploitation cinema. While it would be easy to dismiss these films (and their narrators) as examples of pure, naive camp, the strategies deployed by these stylistically diverse films suggest a more complex relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience. I argued earlier that sleaze is marked in a way that reveals the maker's cynical nature; therefore it is a matter of nuance and interpretation, most often cued by form. In its documentary form, perceiving sleaze depends on both the narrator's relationship to the material and the audience's perception of the filmmaker's relationship to the narrator. It contrasts with naive camp, which is often inept but sincere (with the gap between intention and ability providing the irony and humor). The classic example here is Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953), where the director's obsessive concern to portray male transvestism as normal, socially acceptable, and in no way related to homosexuality collides with clumsy and cheap filmmaking techniques. Nor does sleaze mirror the deliberate trash stance of *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) or *The Devil's Cleavage* (1975), films that invite the audience to play along with the filmmaker's own delight in being bad, violating norms of good taste, and reveling in general outrageousness.

In contrast to the dramatic fictions of Wood, Waters, and Kuchar, the authorial presences of the sleazy documentaries I'm discussing here reveal their cynical and mercenary intent largely though the voice-over or on-screen narrators



FIGURE 6 An impassioned plea for the public acceptance of transvestism, Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953) avoids "sleaziness" by virtue of its naïveté and ineptitude.

themselves. The films break down in the narrators' inability to bring a convincing unity or purpose to their disparate elements of actuality footage, awkward reenactments, and endless opportunities for (near) nudity. Whether attempting to play it straight, as in *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* and *Let Me Die a Woman*, or through a winking parodic mode as in the Mondo films and *The Postgraduate Course in Love*, a narrator and film drift toward sleaze when this narrational authority becomes unconvincing in its attempt to perform artistic, educational, or journalistic motivations. Such slippage would seem to contradict the usual critique of the voice-over narrator, particularly that offered by the Direct Cinema documentarians. In arguing that the voice-over narrator is authoritarian as well as authoritative, that the narration dominates the visuals (which become mere illustrations) and forces a reading on the audience, such critics underestimated the audience's ability to perceive and exploit fissures, incongruities, and ironies between voice and image.

No doubt these slippages, ironies, and an overall sense of "sleaziness" increase with historical distance and changing cultural contexts. Considered today in the contemporary U.S. political climate, *Sexual Freedom in Denmark's* argument that the state education system should include instruction in sexual

technique so women could have more orgasms seems truly revolutionary. In the Clinton administration, after all, Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders lost her job for suggesting that masturbation might give teens a sense of personal autonomy and was useful for controlling teen pregnancy and the rapid spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Today, with a conservative president and Congress pushing “family values” by restricting sex education and enforcing abstinence-only instructions, the film’s journalist-narrator seems a throwback to Wilhelm Reich’s Sex-Pol movement.

The sexploitation documentaries discussed above can be fully understood only within the context of sexual commercialization under late capitalism. The cash nexus around sex means that “everyone knows” you have to pay to get information: for carnal knowledge it’s prostitution; for intellectual knowledge, it’s pornography. The argument made by pornographers that porn is educational has almost always been dismissed as a lame defense for profiting on voyeurism. But in the 1960s, porn was to some extent informative. In a society with very limited information and education about sex, even showing “this is it, this is what it looks like,” carried with it a progressive element. Today sex education in the state sector is heavily restricted by Republicans and Christian fundamentalists, but “for-profit” sex information continues to expand its presence across the media—as long as you pay for it. However, as the ineffable quality of “sleaze” that permeates these early forms of sexploitation suggests, the embedding of sex in consumer culture also carries with it a certain consumer skepticism. In this way, these sleazy documentaries present an inversion of art’s aspiration to the sublime and become instead examples of the capitalist grotesque.

Notes

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1. “The voice of documentary . . . is the means by which this particular point of view or perspective [of the world] becomes known to us,” observes Bill Nichols in *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 43. Nichols established

this concept for documentary in his original article “The Voice of Documentary” (*Film Quarterly* 36.3 [1983]: 17–29), which was elaborated in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Basing his discussion on rhetorical concepts, Nichols develops a typology of documentary modes that employ different rhetorics. Nichols is not referring primarily to the particular vocal qualities of narrators and characters in sound cinema (a concern of Michel Chion in *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman [New York: Columbia University Press, 1999]), although this is a concern with some works discussed here.

2. Chuck Kleinhans, “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Irony,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 182–201.
3. Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Partisan Review* 31 (fall 1964): 515–30.
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
5. International human rights organizations have shown that human slavery does exist, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and in exploitation of immigrants, often in prostitution and sometimes in the United States and Europe as domestics or sweatshop workers.
6. *Mondo Cane* (dir. Gualtiero Jacopetti, Italy, 1962) documented unusual human activities around the world ranging from cannibalism to nude art. The narration draws parallels between presumed civilization and primitive impulses and behaviors to excuse the voyeurism. An international hit, it spawned Jacopetti’s *Mondo Cane 2* and many imitators.
7. As Neil Harris writes, “This delight in learning explains why the experience of deceit was enjoyable even after the hoax had been penetrated, or at least during the period of doubt and suspicion. Experiencing a complicated hoax was pleasurable because of the competition between victim and hoaxer, each seeking to outmaneuver the other, to catch him off-balance and detect the critical weakness. Barnum, Poe, Locke, and other hoaxers didn’t fear public suspicion; they invited it. They understood, most particularly Barnum understood, that the opportunity to debate the issue of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself. The manipulation of a prank, after all, was as interesting a technique in its own right as the presentation of genuine curiosities. Therefore when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to hear how the frauds were committed. Barnum reprinted his own ticket-seller’s analysis. ‘First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it. I believe if he should swindle a man out of twenty dollars, the man would give him a quarter to hear him tell about it’” (*Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973], 77).
8. The definitive scholarly history is Eric Schafer’s “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*”: *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

9. Sociology of deviance was also a central contributing stream of British cultural studies, as in 1970s studies of youth gangs, soccer hooliganism, and subculture activities.
10. Jane Gaines has written a pioneering article on how the ordinary is made strange in some documentaries. See Gaines, "Everyday Strangeness: Robert Ripley's International Oddities as Documentary Attractions," *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 781–801.
11. Apparently this was a conflation of the real Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square. As anyone who has been to London at the time of the film knows, there were public messages for various forms of sex work including massage, domination, and so on, usually posted in telephone boxes at various heavily trafficked locations such as the Underground. While the voice-over announces we are in this imaginary place, we see stock footage of London at night with neon and advertising signs with a cut to a wall with handmade postings. All the notices are slight variations of the same handwriting.
12. Again, a voice-over tells us where we are while an exterior visual of a modest lingerie store window appears before we cut to the dressing room and its one-way mirror, with the camera looking through the mirror at the models and the various title cards provided by directly painting on the glass.
13. The same scratched-eye technique is used by experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage in his landmark *Reflections on Black* (1955). "By attacking the surface of the film and by using materials which reflect back on the conditions of film-making, Brakhage begins to formulate an equation between the process of making film and the search for consciousness which will become more clearly established in his later work as he has greater confidence in the truth of the imagination," writes P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film: The American Avant Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 177.
14. Of course, much of the time news events do not have professional reporters as eye-witnesses (notable exceptions: unanticipated—the Hindenberg disaster; anticipated—Murrow's rooftop reporting during the German Blitz of London), but rather usually appear as on-the-scene reporters after the news breaks. The subsequent advent of television has simply changed an unseen voice into an authoritative standup presence, a persistent convention taken to idiotic lengths when a network news reader who doesn't know the local language appears in a foreign elsewhere telling us authoritatively what is going on, or the late-night news reporter stands at 11:15 p.m. in an empty location where something significant happened earlier in the day.
15. *New Republic*, August 19, 1936; George Dangerfield quoted in Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 102–3.
16. Similarly, the surrealist Luis Buñuel's documentary *Las Hurdes (Land without Bread)*, 1932) employs a narrator to make political points about the poverty depicted, which depends on an audience understanding the offensive voice-over as ironic. Not all audiences (or critics) are able to do so.
17. A classic example was discovered by Dan Streible, in which a fake "Leon Trotsky"

appears in a Fox Movietone newsreel. See Streible, "Tom Mix Meets Leon Trotsky: Newsreel Outtakes as Documentary," www.sc.edu/orphanfilm/orphanage/symposia/scholarship/streible/park-row.html.

18. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).
19. The Johnson administration commissioned an extensive academic research-based report on pornography that was received at the beginning of the Nixon administration. Nixon refused the report and its liberal conclusions, but the report was widely distributed and influenced public discussion. A nongovernment reprinting with illustrations including hard-core images of penetration, fellatio, anal sex, and so forth was sold with (depending on how it was read) the official text providing the excuse for the obscene illustrations, or the images providing the visual explanation not included in the Government Printing Office text-only version. See Earl Kemp, ed., *The Illustrated Presidential Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (San Diego: Greenleaf Classics, 1970).
20. According to several reports, this footage was removed as too objectionable. The current Something Weird Video version has an MD narrator telling the incident on camera, which then cuts to a different scene; apparently the gory self-mutilation footage was elided in the cut. Michael Bowen has restored a full version, forthcoming on DVD, that shows the preparation with a wood chisel and hammer, the swinging mallet, and (film) cut to a fake bloody aftermath.
21. I initially worked with the video version distributed by Something Weird Video; however Wishman's as-told-to biographer Michael Bowen provided me with a copy of his master copy for DVD (private correspondence, October 2003–February 2004). My initial argument rested on the fact that the film begins in medias res with Dr. Wollman leading a discussion group for transsexuals. The group is discussing whether one should tell people one is dating or an employer that one is transsexual. At about twenty-two minutes into the film, we have what I take to be the dramatically appropriate beginning of the film, with Puerto Rican transsexual Leslie talking to the camera and then in close-up saying, "Last year I was a man!" with a cut to the title "Let Me Die a Woman." This is followed by a male voice-over announcer telling us over images of Adam and Eve what we can expect during the film, then introducing "our guide" Leo Wollman, "MD, PhD, doctor, psychologist, minister." The same voice-over announcer appears at the conclusion of the film and provides a summary of what we have seen. This is, of course, classic bookending technique.

Given this, the most logical explanation is that somewhere along the line, the reels were put together in the wrong order, but that no one ever noticed or straightened the matter out. Bowen's version starts with the pretitle remarks by Leslie and then the titles. However, there's little if any evidence that Wishman was ever attentive to the aesthetic

integrity of her films or their prints. No one seems to know who made the decision to excise the self-mutilation fake footage from the film. Tom Waugh reviewed the film in its initial seven-week run in Montreal with the self-castration intact. See Thomas Waugh, "Medical Thrills: *Born a Man . . . Let Me Die a Woman*, 1978–79," in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2000), 72–73. Further, in the abject grindhouse theaters where *Let Me Die a Woman* and other exploitation and porn films played, it was common to witness fairly atrocious projection. In such theaters, personally I have seen films with reels out of order, or sections of different films spliced together, trailers suddenly appearing during a reel change with a subsequent return to the narrative, as well as the results of unattended and inattentive projections such as films breaking, being stuck and burning in the gate, breaks followed by the projector still running for minutes on end, and so forth. This was, after all, the lowest end of the theatrical film world; much of the audience was unable or unwilling to complain (except to shout out, uncomprehending that there is enough noise in the booth that the projectionist cannot hear the audience). Many in the audience were sleeping, drunk, drugged, or engaged in some kind of sexual activity with themselves or others, thus inattentive to the niceties of professional film projection. For an excellent ethnography of the porn theaters in particular, see Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

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matter and formal strategy. Since Mexican cinema also contributed significantly to the dialogue surrounding national identity, indigenismo often achieved cinematic form, influencing early productions like *Redes* (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1934) and *Janitzio* (dir. Carlos Navarro, 1934), and emerging as a principal theme in the films of Emilio Fernández, including *María Candelaria* (1943) and *Río escondido* (1947). While such efforts, in keeping with the prominent strains of this discourse, frequently engage in a simplified, romanticized glorification of an apparently homogenous indigenous culture, another body of work disrupts this reverence through an extreme reversal, situating the Aztec past as horror. In films like *El signo de la muerte* (*The Sign of Death*, dir. Chano Urueta, 1939) and those of the later Aztec